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DOI:

[10.1080/01436597.2018.1460593](https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1460593)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Hill, J. N. C. (2018). Global international relations and the Arab Spring: the Maghreb's challenge to the EU. *Third World Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1460593>

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Global International Relations and the Arab Spring: The Maghreb's Challenge to the EU

Abstract

This article contributes to the Global International Relations project by critically evaluating the roles ascribed to Europe and the EU by Levitsky and Way in their model for explaining regime transitions. Focusing primarily on their international dimensions of linkage and leverage, it assesses both the normative geopolitical underpinnings and explanatory power of their thesis drawing on the North African cases of Tunisia and Mauritania at the start of the Arab Spring to illustrate and substantiate its observations and arguments. It concludes that the EU's failure to discipline either country's competitive authoritarian regime raises important questions about the validity of the privileged role in which they cast Europe.

Keywords

Global International Relations; Levitsky and Way; linkage; leverage; EU; Tunisia; Mauritania; Arab Spring

Introduction

This article contributes to the Global International Relations (GIR) project by critically engaging with Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way's celebrated model for explaining regime transitions. They contend that proximity to Europe holds the key to whether a regime democratises or remains authoritarian. For such propinquity, they maintain, causes countries to forge links with the EU – economic, intergovernmental, technocratic, social, information and civil society – that not only make Brussels more likely to respond to any authoritarian abuses that their governments commit, but also give the European Union the means with which to discipline those who are responsible. Levitsky and Way cast the bloc, therefore, as a

locus of political liberalism from which human and civil rights are spread around the world by means of its example and efforts.¹

The article's interrogation of this claim has two interconnected elements. One is an examination of the normative geopolitical assumptions on which it is based, of the central privileged role it ascribes to Europe and the EU. And the other, is an assessment of its accuracy, of whether the bloc consistently acts as a democratising force. Thus, the article charts and examines the core components of Levitsky and Way's model and the reliability of their arguments. To help illustrate and corroborate this critical analysis, the article then draws on the cases of Tunisia and Mauritania at the start of the Arab Spring to show that, irrespective of each country's distance from Europe, the EU exerted little influence on their respective regime outcomes.

Tunisia and Mauritania are ideal case studies because they are both close to Europe and were once colonised by France. Levitsky and Way argue that the strength and breadth of a country's links to the West are 'rooted' in geography and history.² Their shared proximity to the EU, therefore, eliminates distance as a possible cause of their differing relations with Brussels. That is, Tunisia's much closer ties to the bloc cannot be attributed to its greater propinquity to Europe. This difference can be accounted for, however, by history. For while both countries were colonised by France, Tunisia's colonial experience was longer and more intense than that of Mauritania. This means that geography and history have affected these countries largely as Levitsky and Way said they would. Their non-liberalisation prior to the Arab Spring, therefore, challenges Levitsky and Way's view of the EU as one of the world's moral and political centrifuges.

The article's principal claims to originality are its contribution to the GIR through its engagement with Levitsky and Way's thesis, and critical assessment of their model in the contexts of Tunisia and Mauritania. To sustain these arguments, the paper is divided into four main parts. In the first, it provides an overview of the GIR project. In the second, it gives a summary of Levitsky and Way's thesis and, in particular, their views on Europe and North America, and how these regions influence the political development of the rest of the world. In the third it applies their dimension of linkage to Tunisia and Mauritania at the start of the Arab Spring. And in the fourth it applies their dimension of leverage to these countries over the same period. In making this case, the article builds directly on my earlier work applying Levitsky and Way's model to the countries of the Maghreb over the period of the Arab Spring. More specifically, it seeks to illuminate and analyse some of the key normative assumptions underpinning their thesis and possible tensions in their argument.

The Global International Relations Project

'That the study of International Relations [IR] - its main theories, its dominant centres of teaching and research, its leading publications - neglects and marginalises the world beyond the West is no longer a novel argument that requires proof or elaboration'.³ What is also largely accepted by IR scholars is the undesirability of this situation. For it means that the discipline's experiential and evidential base is simply too narrow to capture fully and explain accurately the wider 'social world'.⁴ Furthermore, it ensures that the influence of the West both within and through International Relations remains intact and continues.

The GIR is one of a number of initiatives intended to address this issue. Named and led by Amitav Acharya, it builds directly on another project he launched with Barry Buzan a decade before that sought to explain 'the absence of non-Western' IR theory (IRT).⁵ Many of the key observations and conclusions of this earlier venture have inspired and informed the 'six main dimensions' on which the GIR is based. These include: a commitment to 'pluralistic universalism', to 'recognizing and respecting ... diversity' rather than applying Western-based concepts and arguments to everyone else; a grounding 'in world ... not just Graeco-Roman, European, or US history' (emphasis original); a desire to 'substitute[], rather than supplant[], existing IR theories and methods'; a determination to integrate 'the study of regions, regionalisms, and area studies'; a rejection of 'exceptionalism'; and, a recognition of 'multiple forms of agency beyond material power, including [those of] resistance, normative action, and local constructions of global order'.⁶

The GIR, then, is not a theory 'but an aspiration for greater inclusiveness and diversity' in IR.⁷ It does not seek, therefore, 'to displace existing (or future) theories ... that may substantially originate from Western ideas and experiences', but to encourage the generation of alternatives that are rooted in the global South.⁸ Indeed, Acharya is sympathetic to the efforts of those who are trying to bridge 'the North-South gap in IRT by ... testing, extending and revising existing theories'.⁹ He acknowledges that Realism has drawn insights from other countries and regions to develop approaches 'more relevant' to their experiences, and that constructivism, with its greater emphasis on culture and identity, has encouraged and enabled more scholarship to be undertaken on Africa, Asia and Latin America.¹⁰ He also credits the critical theories - Marxism, post-structuralism and, in

particular, post-colonialism and feminism – with broadening ‘the relevance and appeal of IR ... around the world’ by speaking more directly to the interests and concerns of this wider audience and pressing mainstream IR to try to do the same.¹¹

Acharya’s desire to transcend the distinction between the West and the Rest, and any ‘similar binary and mutually exclusive categories’, helps distinguish his project from those seeking to inaugurate so-called ‘“post-Western”’ IR.¹² Unlike these other ventures, the GIR does not disavow or want to displace the discipline’s existing concepts and theories. Rather, it wants to add to them, to incorporate new ideas and arguments that are rooted in non-Western contexts and environments in order to make IR more global in its understanding and outlook.

Yet, even though he may be more appreciative of both the West’s ongoing contributions to IR and the efforts of those trying to adapt its theories to the rest of the world, Acharya still believes that these efforts are, by themselves, insufficient to recalibrate the discipline in the ways and to the extent that he thinks is necessary. For such endeavours cannot change the origins of these theories or, by extension, prevent or alter their inherent power-projection and normative functions. Acharya, like Buzan, concurs with Robert Cox (1981, 128) that ‘Theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose’ (emphasis original).¹³ So, despite the success of the ‘constructivist turn’ in fostering ‘a growing body of theoretical work on Africa, Asia and Latin America’,¹⁴ all of IR’s main theories and ideas remain ‘deeply rooted in the particularities and peculiarities of European history’ and ‘the rise of the West to world power’.¹⁵ As such, they not only reflect, but help perpetuate the disparity in global power

that continues to sustain the West's pre-eminence over the Rest.

The GIR project, therefore, has both theoretical and normative implications. Since, in encouraging more challenges to mainstream IRT 'from outside the West',¹⁶ it is also calling for, and trying to bring about, a redistribution in global power. This is also an objective of at least some of those who are attempting to extend and adapt Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism and the English School to non-Western scenarios and situations. Yet, according to Acharya, these endeavours can never succeed because of where they are being launched from, namely, within mainstream IR. So, while the GIR may have similar goals to these initiatives, it is separated from them by its potential, by its greater ability to help affect a redistribution in global power.

The GIR is also distinct from the more critical theories. These are arguably even more closely aligned to the project's intellectual and normative objectives. Indeed, Acharya and Buzan acknowledge that post-colonialism has 'a strong claim' to being 'an indigenous theory', to incorporating and representing the ideas, values, cultures and interests of the global South.¹⁷ Yet, according to Acharya and Buzan, who draw on an argument made by Aijaz Ahmad,¹⁸ post-colonialism is less concerned than the GIR with producing '"fresh knowledges about what was until recently called the Third-World"' and more focused on restructuring '"existing bodies of knowledge into the poststructuralist paradigms"' and with occupying '"sites of cultural production outside the Euro-American zones by globalizing concerns and orientations originating at the central sites of Euro-American cultural production"'.¹⁹

The GIR, then, occupies a unique space in the discipline. It is different from mainstream IRT by not being a theory and its greater ability to address the discipline's normative functions. It is different from critical IRT by, again, not being a theory and its aim of generating new, non-Western knowledges. And it is different from similar post-Western projects by its critical, but less hostile, attitude towards mainstream IRT.

Levitsky and Way, and the role of the West

Levitsky and Way argue that competitive authoritarianism is a governance condition that has proliferated since the end of the Cold War. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, dictatorial practices lost legitimacy and increasingly cost those who used them international political support and material assistance. The victory of the West in this great ideological confrontation not only established its political structures and practices as dynamic and successful, but also concentrated much of the world's remaining development resources in its hands. Its triumph fostered an "almost universal wish to imitate ... [its] way of life" as well as give it the ability - by means of military interventions, economic incentives and pressure, and aid conditionality - to press authoritarian governments and leaders to moderating their behaviour and acting more democratically.²⁰

This normative change in the global environment led many dictatorial regimes around the world to introduce *some* liberal reforms, to combine 'electoral competition with varying degrees of authoritarianism'.²¹ In so doing, their political systems became competitive inasmuch that opposition forces could use the country's newly created or recently strengthened 'democratic institutions to contest vigorously - and, on occasion, successfully - for power', but not fully liberal as

'electoral manipulation, unfair media access, abuse of state resources, and varying degrees of harassment and violence skewed the playing field' heavily in favour of those who held office already.²² Levitsky and Way describe these intermediate or hybrid regimes as competitive authoritarian since they were neither completely dictatorial nor totally democratic.

Despite having cautioned against the '"excessive proliferation of new ... concepts"', Levitsky (and Way) argue 'that competitive authoritarianism is a new phenomenon ... that no existing term adequately captures'.²³ They dismiss 'generic intermediate categories such as hybrid regime, semi-democracy, ... [and] Freedom House's "partly free"' on the grounds that 'democracy is multidimensional' which means that 'there are multiple ways to be partially democratic'.²⁴ Thus, such labels are too broad for the type of regime that they identify which is only one sort of hybrid order. They also reject more specific descriptions of 'existing subtypes of authoritarianism' such as post-totalitarianism and bureaucratic authoritarianism because these 'regimes are noncompetitive'.²⁵ And they discount more recent terms like electoral authoritarianism and semi-authoritarianism because 'they have generally been defined broadly to refer to *all* authoritarian regimes with multiparty elections - both competitive and hegemonic'.²⁶

Levitsky and Way's rejection of these terms and labels reflects their broader dissatisfaction with existing theories of regime transition. They dismiss the widely-held contention that competitive authoritarian regimes invariably democratise because they already exhibit some liberal characteristics. They observe that this is not always the case and that some regimes are able to adapt and survive, and remain in this condition for many years at a time. They also note that not

all of the regimes that do change became more democratic, that some grow increasingly authoritarian. These observations lead them to conclude that competitive authoritarianism is not a stepping stone towards full democracy and that political liberalisation is not a linear process. Rather, it is a distinct state of governance from which regimes can grow either more, or less, authoritarian.

Levitsky and Way also aver that 'the relationship between the international environment and regime change is poorly understood'.²⁷ They argue that not enough effort has been made to 'adjudicate among the various mechanisms of ... [global] influence ... or integrate them into a coherent theoretical framework'.²⁸ They further note that 'many analyses of international democratizing pressure give insufficient attention to how it varies - in both character and intensity - across cases and regions'.²⁹ They maintain that 'most studies ... simply present a laundry list of the various mechanisms of international influence or limit the[ir] focus' to just one factor or process.³⁰ They go on to argue that these analyses fail to acknowledge adequately that 'democratic diffusion' was '"spatially" dependent', and that 'Western efforts to promote democracy' and 'the impact of transnational advocacy networks' vary greatly across the world.³¹

Levitsky and Way developed their model, therefore, better to explain the causes and characteristics of competitive authoritarian orders - which have increased greatly in number since the end of the Cold War - because they felt that existing theories of regime transition did not adequately do so. Thus, the structure and sequencing of their model reflects their dissatisfactions with this literature leading it to place far more emphasis on the changes that have occurred in the global environment since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the

interactions that take place between the international and domestic spheres, and the extent to which what happens in one shapes and influences what transpires in the other.

Accordingly, two out of the three dimensions that comprise Levitsky and Way's model focus on the international and the desire and ability of the West to exact democratic change elsewhere in the world. The first of these parts is linkage and consists of 'the density of ties ... and cross-border flows ... among particular countries and the United States, the EU ..., and Western-dominated multilateral institutions'. It is 'a multidimensional concept that encompasses the myriad networks of interdependence that connect individual polities, economies, and societies to Western democratic communities'.³² And its role is to explain the 'variation in the effectiveness of international democratizing pressure during the post-Cold War period'.³³ It does so by charting and measuring the extent to which the US and the EU are likely to notice, and are prepared to punish, any authoritarian abuses committed by a regime.

The ability of the European Union and the United States to respond in this way is determined, in part, by the second dimension of leverage. It encompasses the capacity of authoritarian regimes both to prevent any disciplinary measures being taken against them in the first instance, and to cope with that pressure which is put upon them.³⁴ It refers less, therefore, to the ability of the EU and the US to exercise coercion, and more 'to a country's vulnerability' to their actions.³⁵ Accordingly, the amount of leverage Western governments possess over a regime is determined by a range of factors including: the consistency with which they pursue their respective foreign policies towards the country that they are trying to influence; the degree to which they

coordinate their efforts with one another; the 'size and strength' of the target country's state and economy; and whether the regime in question has the backing of a '"black knight[]," or counter-hegemonic power' to help 'blunt the impact' of the measures being taken against it.³⁶ Indeed, black knights can play crucial roles in determining the success of the West's liberalising endeavours.³⁷

The model's third and final dimension is organisational power. It is the only part of Levitsky and Way's thesis to focus on domestic factors and forces. Their approach to assessing these also differs from that of most other studies. They contend that many existing analyses focus largely or exclusively on the opposition (unions, civil society groups and insurgents) and the role it plays 'in undermining authoritarianism and/or installing democracy'.³⁸ In contrast, Levitsky and Way aver that 'regime outcomes also hinge on incumbents' capacity to resist' internal threats.³⁹ Regimes with 'effective state and party organizations', therefore, are better equipped 'to prevent elite defection[s], co-opt or repress opponents, defuse or crack down on protest, and win (or steal) elections', to do all that is necessary to survive even 'vigorous opposition challenges'.⁴⁰ Accordingly, their model places less emphasis on the opposition and more on the organisational capacity of the regime in question.

The primacy of the international over the domestic within Levitsky and Way's model is reinforced by the structure and sequencing of their thesis. For it is designed to be applied in a specific order, starting with the dimension of linkage before moving on to that of leverage and only then considering the organisational power of the regime being targeted. Thus, the actions and interests of Western governments and institutions frame its analysis and exert a decisive influence

on whether and how a regime develops. Only those regimes possessed of strong state and party structures and a determination to endure, therefore, are likely to be able to withstand the West's democratising pressure when consistently and resolutely applied.

Levitsky and Way contend that the variation in Europe's and North America's links to and influence over other regimes is determined, above all, by geography and history. They argue that countries that are closer to the West's borders tend to have stronger ties to it than those that are further removed. Similarly, peoples that have experienced greater historical interaction with the West - even if this contact was the result of colonisation or military occupation - are often bound more tightly to it than those that have not.⁴¹ Not least, as Western imperial expansion was usually accompanied by - and, indeed, drove - the spread of capitalism to these territories which, Levitsky and Way argue, encourages 'cross-border economic activity, communication, and travel'.⁴²

Levitsky and Way's model, then, places Europe at the heart of a global order that, they argue, was established in the wake of the Cold War and which the EU has done much to shape and influence. Not only has the bloc accrued significant hard power benefits from the concentration of many of the world's remaining 'sources of external assistance' in its hands, but it has also gained notable soft power advantages from its close association with the 'prevailing global norms (... liberalism, pluralism, and autonomy)' that it helped engender and propagate.⁴³ Thus, Levitsky and Way's understanding of international relations - on which their regime transition model is based - assumes and perpetuates Europe's and the West's global pre-eminence.

Levitsky and Way's model also reflects their belief in the legitimacy of this arrangement, of the desirability of the EU's central position within the international system. Confirmation that they hold this view is provided by their notion of the black knight. This description is clearly pejorative. It implies a willingness to make mischief, if not act malevolently, unilaterally, in pursuit of individual, rather than collective, goals, against universal values and expectations. Levitsky and Way did not coin the term,⁴⁴ but use it as it was intended, freely and without qualification. And they apply it to regimes that either find themselves, on certain issues, on the periphery of mainstream Western opinion, or that have never been part of the West. They apply it to regimes that, either occasionally or habitually, want to limit or contain Western power and influence. They apply it most frequently to Russia and China, and less often to France and Japan.⁴⁵ By having the means to resist the mainstream West, and in doing so successfully on occasion, these counter hegemonic regimes are cast in a negative light. In being described as black knights they are portrayed as anti-Western which, by extension, makes them anti-democratic, pro-authoritarian, regressive and overtly self-interested.

Tunisia's and Mauritania's links to Europe and the EU

On the eve of the Arab Spring, both the Tunisian and Mauritanian regimes can be described as competitive authoritarian. Each was led by someone who had seized power in a *coup d'état*, yet had retained it through the ballot box. Each was mindful of, and sought to act in accordance with, the national constitution. Each held regular elections; local, provincial, parliamentary and presidential. Each allowed rival political parties and opposition candidates to campaign and to participate in these votes. Each permitted civil society groups to be established and to operate openly. Each promised

to reinforce the rule of law and to strengthen the country's democratic institutions and processes. And each was praised for doing so by the West.⁴⁶

Yet neither was fully democratic. Elections were held regularly in compliance with each country's constitution, but were never truly free and fair. The incumbents - Presidents Ben Ali of Tunisia and Abdel Aziz of Mauritania - and the electoral candidates who stood for their ruling parties - the Democratic Constitutional Rally (Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique, RCD) and the Union for the Republic (Union pour la République, UR) respectively - enjoyed significant unfair advantages over their rivals. Indeed, between elections and during them, the political playfields in both countries were tilted decisively in favour of those already in power. This much was confirmed repeatedly by the size of their respective 'victories'. In the last elections in which they each participated, Ben Ali secured 89.2 percent (2009) and Abdel Aziz 81 percent (2014) of the vote, while the RCD and the UR took 75.2 percent (2009) and 50.6 percent (2013) of the seats in their respective country's parliament.⁴⁷

Yet, this classification, especially in the case of Tunisia, is open to challenge. For while the Ben Ali regime permitted the existence of channels by which opposition candidates and parties could 'contest legally for executive power',⁴⁸ the quality of these avenues was such that his grip on the presidency and government was never truly threatened prior to his eventual overthrow. Thus, while the Tunisian regime conforms to the letter of Levitsky and Way's definition of competitive authoritarian, it arguably enjoyed greater security than that. That this was the case serves to emphasise the EU's failure to put greater democratising pressure on

Tunis and Brussels's willingness to suspend its disbelief of the regime's direction of political travel.

Despite being formally competitive authoritarian, Tunisia had high linkage to the EU. Levitsky and Way calculate the strength of a country's bonds to the West by assessing the intensity of its relations with the EU and the US across several areas of activity. They focus on 'flows of trade, investment, and credit' (economic); 'diplomatic and military ties as well as participation in Western-led alliances, treaties, and international organizations' (intergovernmental); 'the share of ... [the target state's] elite that is educated in the West and/or has professional ties to ... universities' there (technocratic); 'flows of people across borders', and the size, influence and importance of 'diaspora networks' in Europe and North America (social); 'flows of information ... via telecommunications, Internet connections, and Western media penetration' (information); and 'local ties to Western-based NGOs, international religious and party organizations, and other transnational' associations (civil society).⁴⁹ This assessment determines whether a country's links to the West are graded high, medium or low.

Tunisia has strong links to the European Union in each of these categories of connection. In 2016, as in previous years, it both imported (55.8 percent) and exported (77.4 percent) more to the bloc than it did to the rest of the world combined.⁵⁰ It also received remittances from its citizens living abroad - most of whom were based in Europe - amounting to \$1.7 billion or 4.3 percent of its annual GDP.⁵¹ It is a member of each of the EU's four policy frameworks for the region,⁵² and was of one the first partner states to sign both its association agreement (1995),⁵³ and its action plan (2004).⁵⁴ It was, as a result, given nearly a billion Euros

(€945.6 million) in Accompanying Measures funding (Mesures d'Accompagnement, MEDA) over this period,⁵⁵ and €140 million in Support for Partnership, Reforms and Inclusive Growth (SPRING) funding between 2011 and 2013.⁵⁶

Tunisia's technocratic links to the EU are similarly strong. Of the current 28 government ministers (August 2017), 16 (57 percent) have studied in either Europe or North America. The time these important public figures spent abroad in this fashion is typical of many thousands of their compatriots. Indeed, the EU has long been the preferred destination of Tunisian students studying abroad. Of the 17,814 of the them who attended university overseas in 2014, 13,983 (78.5 percent) were enrolled at institutions in the EU.⁵⁷ The clear majority (8,995) were based in France where they comprised the fourth largest contingent of foreign nationals in the country's universities.⁵⁸ These students form part of the ongoing mass movement of people between Tunisia and the European Union. As of 2014, there were an estimated 442,000 and 15,007 first-generation Tunisian and EU migrants living in Europe and Tunisia respectively.⁵⁹ Also in that year, Tunisia received 7.1 million visitors,⁶⁰ most of whom (6 million, 84.5 percent) were from the EU.⁶¹

Inevitably, the strength of Tunisia's human ties to the European Union, and certain member states in particular, has generated and sustains a wide range of important civil society links between the country and the EU. Tunisian groups and organisations have long been actively involved in a host of pan-Mediterranean bodies. The Committee for the Respect of Freedom and Human Rights (Comité pour le Respect des Libertés et des Droits de l'Homme, CRLDHT), for example, is a member of the influential transnational EuroMed Rights network which seeks 'to promote and strengthen human rights and democratic

reform in the Euro-Mediterranean region' by developing and fortifying 'partnerships between non-governmental organisations (NGOs), disseminat[ing] human rights values, advocat[ing] for them and increas[ing] the capabilities of local partners'.⁶² The CRLDHT was established long before the Arab Spring began (in 1996) to promote 'freedom, human rights and democracy in Tunisia', is headed by a Tunisian national (Tarek Ben Hiba) and maintains its head office in Paris.⁶³ Like many other such civil society groups, therefore, the CRLDHT is trans-Mediterranean in both outlook and organisation.

Finally, Tunisia has strong information links to the EU. The mass movement of people between the two is one important way in which news, knowledge and, most crucially, alternative interpretations of what is taking place in the country is disseminated to and around its population. The past 15 years have also witnessed a massive expansion in mobile phone and internet use in the country. In 2000, just 1.2 percent of the populace subscribed to a cell phone service, but by 2015 129.9 percent did.⁶⁴ Similarly, in 2000 only 2.7 percent of the population used the internet. By 2015, however, this number had jumped to 48.5 percent.⁶⁵ By these means, therefore, Tunisians are increasingly able to follow what is taking place in the EU and to learn what Europe thinks is happening in their country.

Mauritania, in contrast, has weaker links to the European Union in all of these categories of connection. In 2016, its balance of trade with the bloc (31.5 percent) was the lowest in the Maghreb as it was the only country in the region to export more to China (32.2 percent) than to the EU (23.7 percent).⁶⁶ And while it is a member of the UfM and the only Maghreb country to take part in the EU's Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel (SSDS), it has not joined either

the ENP, the EMP or the PfDSP. As a result, it has concluded neither an association agreement nor an action plan with Brussels so has not been awarded any MEDA or SPRING funding.

Mauritania's technocratic links to the EU are also not as strong as Tunisia's although they are still significant. Of its 30 government ministers (August 2017), 15 (50 percent) have completed at least some of their higher education in either Europe or North America.⁶⁷ The educational experiences of these public figures, though, are far less typical than those of their compatriots. Not only do significantly fewer Mauritaniens study and live in the EU, but hardly any Europeans visit or spend time in Mauritania. Indeed, it is the only Maghreb country for which a majority of the members of its diaspora reside in other parts of Africa rather than the EU. Of the 198,307 Mauritaniens living abroad in 2013, 145,500 (or 73.4 percent) were based elsewhere in the continent and only 28,897 (or 14.5 percent) in Europe.⁶⁸ Its weaker human links to the EU also mean that it has fewer civil society connections to the bloc than Tunisia or any of its other northern neighbours. Indeed, it is the only one of the region's countries that does not participate in the EuroMed network.

Finally, Mauritania's information links to the EU are also slightly weaker than those of Tunisia. Over the past 15 years, the mobile phone and internet usage of its citizens have grown exponentially. In 2000, just 0.5 percent of its population had cell phone contracts. By 2015, though, this figure had leapt to 89.3 percent.⁶⁹ Similarly, in 2000 only 0.1 percent of its populace used the internet, but by 2015 15.1 percent did.⁷⁰ Mauritaniens, then, are much better equipped than they used to be to access additional and alternative sources of information, and communicate and discuss this news with one

another. Yet even so, they are still not quite as well connected as Tunisians. Not only do fewer of them have mobile phones and use the internet than their northern neighbours, but their country does not receive nearly the same number of foreign visitors and is not penetrated by Western media to anything like the same extent.

Tunisia, then, continues to have high linkage to the European Union. This should mean, according to Levitsky and Way, that Brussels takes the keenest possible interest in the actions of its government and would be likely to respond to any authoritarian abuses that it might commit. Mauritania, in contrast, still has only medium links to the EU. This means that Brussels is less attuned to, and concerned with, what is taking place there, and, as a consequence, less likely to respond to any repressive or undemocratic measures taken by its government. Based on this analysis, Tunisia's rejection of authoritarian rule should have occurred much sooner *and* as a result of the democratising pressure put on Ben Ali's regime by the EU and the wider West. And while Mauritania's liberalisation remains less certain, the country's connections to Europe are still sufficiently strong to render its competitive authoritarian order vulnerable to pressure from Brussels.

The EU's leverage over Tunisia and Mauritania

Levitsky and Way calculate the strength of the West's leverage over a regime by assessing the target state's economic and military capabilities, and control of certain strategic resources, against a range of pre-determined thresholds. They argue that Western governments have low leverage over a country if it either has a large economy with a total GDP of more than \$1 billion; or, is a major oil producer that, in the course of a year, extracts an average of one million barrels

of crude a day; or, has reliable and consistent access to nuclear weapons. They maintain that the West has medium leverage over a country if it *either* has a mid-sized economy with a total GDP of between \$50 billion and \$100 billion; or, is a secondary oil producer that, in a 12-month period, pumps an average of 200,000 to one million barrels a day; or, is the site of 'a major security-related foreign policy issue for the United States and/or the EU'; or, is the recipient of considerable amounts of bilateral aid (totalling at least one percent of its GDP), most of which is provided by a black knight power. Finally, they contend that the West has high leverage over a regime if it does not meet any of these criteria.⁷¹

The EU has had high leverage over Tunisia from before the Arab Spring began. For the country has but a small economy,⁷² is neither a major nor an intermediate oil producer, possesses no nuclear weapons, and does not have the backing of a black knight patron. It still lacks, therefore, both the means and the friends that Levitsky and Way say that it needs to be able to withstand the democratising pressure that Brussels could put on it. These deficiencies continue to be offset to a small degree, by the country's location in a region of immense importance to the EU. Europe's longstanding anxieties over Islamist terrorism, energy, and illegal migration have established North Africa as a region of special interest to its members and institutions.

Nevertheless, at the time the Arab Spring began, Brussels's leverage over Tunisia was still high rather than medium as the country was less affected by these issues than many of its neighbours. Indeed, the dangers posed by Islamist terror groups operating in and out of its territory have only developed recently, since the fall of Ben Ali's regime, and

are still not as grave as those presented by factions and forces based elsewhere in the region. Tunisia certainly was, therefore, and to a lesser extent remains, a security backwater as it neither faces nor raises the sorts and size of problems that do Libya, Syria, Yemen, Egypt, Algeria and other countries.

Tunisia's comparative stability helps explain why the European Union and the wider West supported Ben Ali and his competitive authoritarian regime and declined to bring the full weight of their leverage wholly to bear upon it in pursuit of their purported goal of effecting its liberalisation. In addition to their concerns over the security and stability of the region, the EU and the US bought into, and thereby helped perpetuate, 'three mythologies' about Ben Ali's Tunisia - 'its economic miracle, its democratic gradualism and its *laïcité*' - which further helped dissuade them from putting more democratising pressure on the regime.⁷³ Despite its geographic and historical proximity to Tunisia, therefore, the EU did not pursue, let alone achieve, the political liberalisation that Levitsky and Way say is a defining feature of its international role.

The EU has had medium leverage over Nouakchott from before the Arab Spring began. The country only has a small economy,⁷⁴ is neither a major nor an intermediate oil producer, has no nuclear weapons, and does not currently have the backing of a black knight patron. Like Tunisia, therefore, it remains ill-equipped to resist effectively the democratising pressure that the European Union could put upon it. Unlike Tunisia, however, it was, and still is, heavily involved at least two 'security-related foreign policy' issues of great importance to Europe, namely, containing and countering the various Islamist terror groups operating across the southern Maghreb and West Africa,

and managing and restricting the flow of illegal migrants towards the EU.

Since the mid-2000s, Mauritania has involuntarily played host to several armed factions. Its long and porous borders, vast and sparsely populated territory, and small and poorly equipped security forces made it an ideal location in which such groups could plan, prepare, rest and rebuild. Most of the bands that were based there were connected either by origin, affiliation or personnel to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).⁷⁵ In addition to carrying out dozens of bombings, shootings and abductions in Mauritania itself,⁷⁶ they used its territory as a staging post from which to attack targets in neighbouring countries and extend their influence southwards into the Sahel and West Africa.⁷⁷ It was the presence and activities of these factions, and the generally low ability of Mauritania's security forces to deal with them, that prompted the EU to set up the SSDS and 5 + 5 Initiative. Unlike Tunisia, therefore, Mauritania found itself in the frontline of the global fight against Islamist terrorism before the Arab Spring began.

The European Union also considers the country a vital partner in its efforts to control and restrict the flow of illegal migrants from and through North Africa.⁷⁸ In addition to being the closest landmass to the Canary Islands, the country lies directly to the south of Morocco, the only North African state to share a border with the EU. Not only has the country long been a key staging post for migrants seeking to make the short sea voyage to this Spanish territory, but it is also a major thoroughfare for others trying to reach Europe via Morocco and Algeria. Furthermore, it has come to play a vital 'dual role' for Brussels as both a 'receiver of "returned" migrants' who

have been intercepted while attempting to get to the EU, and as a 'returner of migrants'.⁷⁹

Paradoxically, while these security-related foreign policy issues have served to reduce the European Union's leverage over Mauritania from high to medium, they have had less consistent impact on Brussels's willingness to discipline Nouakchott. For whereas the EU responded to the 2005 and 2008 military-led *coups d'état* by condemning the actions of those who seized power and temporarily suspending its aid provision, it declined to take any such measures during the Arab Spring in support of the pro-democracy protestors demanding the reform of the country's competitive authoritarian order.

The inconsistency of the EU's behaviour presents Levitsky and Way's thesis with at least two challenges. The first is over the relative importance of the various criteria that they use to determine the extent of the West's leverage over a country. And the second, and more significant here, is over the consistency with which the EU uses its leverage to punish authoritarian abuses and promote political liberalisation. For even though, Brussels had shown that it had the means and the appetite to discipline Mauritania's undemocratic behaviour, it declined to use its leverage during the Arab Spring, at a time when regional developments increased the pressure on North Africa's authoritarian orders.

Conclusion

This article contributes to the GIR by charting and challenging the privileged role Levitsky and Way accord the EU in their celebrated model for explaining regime transitions. More specifically, it interrogates one of their most important claims: that proximity to Europe (or North America) is the key determinant of regime development, of whether a country

becomes more, or less, democratic. This interrogation has two aspects. One is an analysis of the normative geopolitical assumptions on which Levitsky and Way's thesis is based. They contend that the West's triumph in the Cold War resulted in its values - including that of democracy - achieving global primacy. Not only did the alternatives offered by the Soviet Union lose both credibility and their main sponsor, but the concentration of most of the world's remaining development resources in Western hands meant that many authoritarian regimes had to embrace these values to receive the external assistance on which they relied. And even though some governments refused to accede to these pressures, and others did so only partially, leading to the exponential growth in the number of competitive authoritarian orders in the world, the West and its values still gained pre-eminence.

This supposition informs the structure and sequencing of Levitsky and Way's model both of which help set it apart from existing explanations. Indeed, their thesis places far more emphasis than other accounts on the West's influence which it charts and measures through its dimensions of linkage and leverage. The former refers to the range and intensity of ties between a country and Europe, while the latter denotes the ability of target states to withstand whatever democratising pressure is put upon them by the EU. Thus, Levitsky and Way place Europe at the heart of international affairs.

Authoritarian regimes are under pressure to liberalise because of the normative and material shifts in international power brought about by the end of the Cold War. And the actual processes of democratisation are both driven and determined by a country's geographical and historical propinquity to Europe.

The other aspect of the article's interrogation is its assessment of the validity of Levitsky and Way's claim that

the European Union habitually acts as a democratising force in the world. It challenges this assertion by drawing on the cases of Tunisia and Mauritania at the start of the Arab Spring. Despite being located similar distances from Europe and their parallel experiences as former territories of France's overseas empire, their respective relations with Brussels were quite different. Not only were Tunisia's links to the EU stronger than those of Mauritania, but the bloc had greater leverage over Tunis than it did Nouakchott. Yet, despite these differences, both countries were competitive authoritarian at the time the protests began. Up until that point, the EU had failed to bring about the political liberalisation of either regime. Despite having the means to put potentially decisive democratising pressure on Tunis, it did not do so. And even though it had been prepared to discipline Nouakchott's authoritarian abuses in the recent past, it declined to intervene in a comparable way on this occasion. Tunisia's and Mauritania's experiences at the start of the Arab Spring challenge the image of the EU presented by Levitsky and Way. In making these arguments, therefore, the article not only exposes the Eurocentrism at the heart of their thesis, but highlights its deleterious impact on the explanatory prowess of their model.

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¹ Levitsky and Way adopt a procedural definition of democracy that includes five key attributes, namely: '(1) free, fair, and competitive elections; (2) full adult suffrage; (3) broad protection of civil liberties, including freedom of speech, press, and association; ... (4) the absence of nonelected "tutelary" authorities', and (5) 'the existence of a reasonably level playing field between incumbents and opposition'. Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*, 5-6.

² Ibid, 44.

³ Acharya, 'Dialogue and Discovery', 620.

⁴ Acharya and Buzan, 'Why is there no non-Western international relations theory?', 289.

⁵ Ibid, 287.

⁶ Acharya, 'Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds', 619.

⁷ Ibid, 619.

⁸ Acharya, 'Dialogue and Discovery', 620.

⁹ Ibid, 623.

¹⁰ Acharya, 'Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds', 650.

¹¹ Acharya, 'Dialogue and Discovery', 623.

¹² Acharya, 'Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds', 619.

¹³ Acharya and Buzan, 'Why is there no non-Western international relations theory?', 289.

¹⁴ Acharya, 'Dialogue and Discovery', 623.

¹⁵ Acharya and Buzan, 'Why is there no non-Western international relations theory?', 293.

¹⁶ Ibid, 290.

¹⁷ Ibid, 308.

¹⁸ Ahmad, 'Postcolonial theory and the 'post'-condition', 368.

¹⁹ Acharya and Buzan, 'Why is there no non-Western international relations theory?', 309.

²⁰ Ibid, 17.

²¹ Ibid, 3.

²² Ibid, 3.

²³ Collier and Levitsky, 'Democracy with Adjectives', 451 cited in Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*, 13-14.

²⁴ Ibid, 14.

²⁵ Ibid, 15.

²⁶ Ibid, 16.

²⁷ Ibid, 39.

²⁸ Ibid, 39.

²⁹ Ibid, 39-40.

³⁰ Ibid, 39.

³¹ Ibid, 39-40.

³² Ibid, 43.

³³ Ibid, 43.

³⁴ Ibid, 40-41.

³⁵ Ibid, 41.

³⁶ Ibid, 41.

³⁷ Levitsky and Way define these states as high-income countries (with per capita GDPs of at least \$10,000), or major military powers (that spend more than \$10 billion a year on defence). Ibid, 372-372.

³⁸ Ibid, 54.

³⁹ Ibid, 55.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 56.

⁴¹ Ibid, 44.

⁴² Ibid, 44.

⁴³ Nye, *Soft Power*, 31-32.

⁴⁴ Levitsky and Way take the term from Hufbauer et al. See: Hufbauer, G.A., J.J. Schott and K.A. Elliot. *Economic Sanctions Reconsidered: History and*

Current Policy. Washington D.C.: Institute for International Economics, 1990.

⁴⁵ Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*, 41.

⁴⁶ As Nadia Marzouki reports, 'in April 2008, on an official visit to Tunis, French President Nicholas Sarkozy declared that "some people are way too harsh with Tunisia, which is developing openness and tolerance in many respects"'. Marzouki, 'Tunisia's Wall Has Fallen', 17-18.

⁴⁷ This equated to 161 of 214 seats for the RCD and 74 of 146 for the UR. Powel and Sadiki, *Europe and Tunisia*, 53; Miller et al., *Democratization in the Arab World*, 67; and, Buehler, *Continuity through Co-optation*, 379.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 7.

⁴⁹ Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*, 43-44.

⁵⁰ European Commission, 'European Union, Trade in Goods with Tunisia', 8.

⁵¹ The World Bank, 'Personal Remittances, Received (current US\$)'; The World Bank, 'Personal Remittances, Received (% of GDP)'.

⁵² These are the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity (PfDSP).

⁵³ The agreement came into force on 1 March 1998. Holden, 'Security, Power or Profit?', 22.

⁵⁴ The plan took effect on 4 July 2005. Del Sarto and Schumacher, 'From Brussels with Love', 932.

⁵⁵ This funding was awarded over two periods: €428 million between 1995-1999, and €517.6 million between 2000-2006. European Union, 'Mediterranean Neighbourhood Countries'.

⁵⁶ Bicchi, 'The Politics of Foreign Aid and the European Neighbourhood Policy Post-Arab Spring', 329.

⁵⁷ UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 'Education: Inbound Internationally Mobile Students by Country of Origin'.

⁵⁸ Institute of International Education, 'Inbound Mobility - Past Years'.

⁵⁹ De Bel-Air, 'Migration Profile: Tunisia', 5.

⁶⁰ Republic of Tunisia, Ministry of Tourism and Handicrafts, 'Tourism in Figures'.

⁶¹ Eurostat, 'Arrival of Tourists at the Border'.

⁶² EuroMed Rights, 'Who We Are.'

⁶³ Ibid, 'Committee for the Respect of Freedom and Human Rights'.

⁶⁴ World Bank, 'Mobile Cellular Subscriptions'.

⁶⁵ World Bank, 'Individuals using the Internet'.

⁶⁶ European Commission, 'European Union, Trade in Goods with Mauritania', 8.

⁶⁷ Agence Mauritanienne d'Information, 'Le Gouvernement'.

⁶⁸ Migration Policy Centre, 'Mauritania', 1.

⁶⁹ World Bank, 'Mobile Cellular Subscriptions'.

⁷⁰ World Bank, 'Individuals using the Internet'.

⁷¹ Ibid, 372-373.

⁷² In 2010, Tunisia's GDP was \$44 billion and in 2016 \$42 billion. World Bank, 'Tunisia'.

⁷³ Cavatorta and Haugbølle, 'The End of Authoritarian Rule', 182.

⁷⁴ In 2010, Mauritania's GDP was \$4.3 billion and in 2016 \$4.6 billion. World Bank, 'Mauritania'.

⁷⁵ Lounnas, 'Confronting Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib in the Sahel', 814-816.

⁷⁶ Girod and Walters, 'Elite-Led Democratisation in Aid-Dependent States', 184.

⁷⁷ Lounnas, 'Confronting Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib in the Sahel', 815.

⁷⁸ Attinà, 'Mediterranean Security Revisited', 124-125.

⁷⁹ This means that 'European states can "return" migrants to Mauritania who belong to any African nationality', and that Mauritania, in turn, 'can "return" sub-Saharan [to] just outside its borders'. Cross, 'Rents, Rights, Rejections and Resistance', 836.